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SUBJECT: KOCAELI ELECTIONS SHAPING UP AS TWO PARTY RACE

REF: A. ANKARA 118

1B. ANKARA 125

11. Summary. A hard-fought and close race for the Mayorship of Kocaeli Greater Municipality, the largest city in Kocaeli Province, is shaping up between the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) and main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP). In the last municipal elections, Ibrahim Karaosmanoglu, the current AKP mayor of this key industrial city, defeated his CHP opponent by a margin of more than two to one. CHP is determined to reverse that result in the March election, and has recruited as its candidate Sefa Sirmen, who served as Kocaeli's mayor for the three terms preceding Karaosmanoglu. With recession settling in and corruption allegations dogging AKP, the race is expected to be tight. End summary.

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A Grinding Recession Ahead for Kocaeli  
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12. Kocaeli Province, located directly east of Istanbul, is home to approximately 1,300,000 people, and is the richest province in Turkey. Kocaeli's wealth comes primarily from manufacturing, which is responsible for some 73 percent of its GDP. (Services make up most of the remainder.) According to Kocaeli Governor Gokhan SQzer, in 2007 annual exports (mostly to Europe) from Kocaeli equaled some 13 billion USD, and imports to Kocaeli equaled 24 billion. Chief among the sectors located in the province is the automotive industry (Ref. A), which accounts for 20 percent of Turkey's total exports. Ford, Hyundai, Honda and Isuzu, as well as a number of auto parts and tire manufacturers, have plants in the city; currently, some 119 local companies have foreign investors. (On the wall of the simple diner where we had lunch during a recent visit hung four clocks, showing the current time in Kocaeli, London, New York and Tokyo.)

13. The AKP leadership has proclaimed that Turkey will be able to weather the global economic crisis better than most countries, because it is relatively insulated from the global economy. This is not true for Kocaeli, whose economy is vitally dependent upon exports. According to Governor SQzer, since the crisis began in June, there has been a 25-30 percent decrease in industrial output and a concomitant increase in unemployment. Thus, while six months ago an easy AKP win was the conventional wisdom, the mayorship must now be considered in play.

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No Worries for AKP's Nominee  
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¶ 14. Kocaeli Mayor Ibrahim Karaosmanoglu, although acknowledging the problems the local economy faces, was resolutely upbeat about winning reelection. According to Karaosmanoglu, Turkey is one of the countries in Europe least affected by the crisis. Nevertheless, while claiming most sectors have not been affected as much as the auto industry, he acknowledged businesses are concerned, and people are avoiding risks and are cautious in their investments.

Karaosmanoglu claimed there has not been much decrease in the retail sector, except for big-ticket items that need credit.

¶ 15. When asked about CHP's claim that it can contest the Kocaeli mayoral election, Karaosmanoglu said it reminds him of the Turkish saying, "Hope is the bread of the poor." He thinks it would be good if the opposition was stronger, as this would make AKP more active and alert. AKP does polling in Kocaeli every six months, and so far people seem happy with their local government, with support hovering around 60-70 percent. The economy may have a "small effect," he said, but in local elections voters distinguish between the central and local governments. He predicted that AKP will do better in local elections throughout the country than it did in 2007 -- garnering as much as 50 percent of the overall vote. Karaosmanoglu said he will rely upon AKP's usual get-out-the-vote strategy, claiming AKP grass roots workers will contact 100 percent of eligible voters.

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CHP Nominee Plans a Comeback  
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¶ 16. The CHP candidate is provincial Party Chair and former three-time mayor Sefa Sirmen. Sirmen did not seek re-election in 2004, having won a seat in Parliament in 2002. However, he surrendered that seat in 2007 to run again for mayor, explaining that being an opposition party member in Parliament "is not much fun." Sirmen intends to run by comparing his record of achievements against those made by AKP. He says that AKP made major mistakes in planning and prioritizing projects, as a result of which much money has been misspent. He claims that while AKP has spent 5 billion dollars in five years without completing any significant projects, CHP spent but one billion dollars over 15 years and accomplished much.

¶ 17. According to Sirmen, Kocaeli's biggest need is for a mass transit system. He does not, however, plan to run an issues-based campaign, claiming that in local mayoral elections people focus on a candidate's leadership qualities and track record, rather than on the party's platform (Ref B). Sirmen plans to seek contributions from the public (a tactic that is almost unknown in Turkey) and to adopt Obama's campaign slogan and fund-raising approach, to get "everyone" to contribute to his campaign -- "even just one lira" -- so that they can feel part of his campaign.

¶ 18. In his three prior campaigns, Sirmen received an average of 15 percent more support than did his party's municipal council candidate list, which he says shows he is more popular than his party. Thus, Sirmen does not view his membership in CHP as a handicap; "I will win despite my party," he asserted. (Comment: In the 2004 elections, in which Sirmen did not compete, the current mayor bested the AKP council candidates by 7 points, perhaps indicating that Sirmen's record is not unique.) When asked why CHP was not more popular, Sirmen first pointed to a huge poster of party chair Deniz Baykal, then noted that it is "obvious that people don't see Baykal and (Nationalist Action Party (MHP) chair Devlet) Bahceli as real alternatives."

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Democratic Party Planning A (Lesser) Comeback  
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¶9. The Democratic Party's candidate for mayor is businessman Tugcu Tezer. We met with him, DP's Kocaeli party president Ercument Sahin, and a number of DP party officials at its somewhat run-down party headquarters. In recent years DP has not been a force in Kocaeli (nor nationally) because, according to Sahin, the party has "lost its way." Nevertheless, local party officials feel that better days are ahead. They point to DP's long history of involvement in Turkish politics (the party was formed in 1946); the three successive national elections it won in the 1980s under the leadership of Suleyman Demirel; and claim that it is the "natural home" for center-right voters, both religious and secular. They believe that many DP supporters who turned to AKP have been disappointed by AKP's performance, and expect (like most observers) that the local elections will be a referendum on AKP's nationwide performance -- which they claim has been "a big failure" for two years. They acknowledge that CHP is the main opposition party, but believe CHP has been ineffective and its leader Deniz Baykal unconvincing.

¶10. Tezer said that his platform will focus on "honesty, credibility and transparency," and that it will include planks for improving the local educational system, providing support for the disabled (of which there are many in Kocaeli, he said, because of its heavy industry), and developing a monorail system. Yet, the DP officials recognize that they have no chance of winning the local mayorship. (In the 2004 elections DP received 15 votes.) Rather, DP believes the local elections are a means to a greater end -- its return to the national political stage. Its strategy is to do well enough in the local elections to force general elections. According to DP's (to us, wildly optimistic) calculations, AKP's support in the local elections will drop to about 25 percent, compelling the party to call elections, in which DP hopes to get 10 percent of the vote, thus crossing the electoral threshold and earning a position as a coalition partner.

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Felicity Party Keeping the Faith  
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¶11. The Felicity Party ("Saadet" in Turkish) is the most openly religious of the major political parties in Turkey. It has the same Virtue Party roots as AKP, but, said local party officials, considers itself to be the true keeper of the faith, which AKP supposedly has abandoned in order to be "all things to all people." The party officials claimed Saadet will be one of the strongest parties. They claimed that in the last three elections, Saadet did better in Kocaeli than anywhere else in Turkey -- receiving almost 7 percent of the vote in the province and over 10 percent of the vote in the greater municipality (over twice its national results in the 2004 election). They attributed these results to good party organization which they, like AKP, learned from their Virtue Party antecedents.

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Comment  
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¶12. The results of local elections will in most cases hinge on the personalities and track records of the candidates. In close cases, voters' views of AKP's national performance may be the tie-breaking factor. In Kocaeli, where the AKP and CHP candidates are both successful politicians well-known to local voters, the results may well boil down to the electorate's perception of how well AKP has ruled the country these past five years. An AKP win here despite the grinding recession would confirm the AKP philosophy that in politics organization is paramount.

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